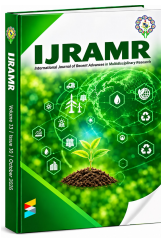
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REVIEW ARTICLE

LANGUAGE ISSUES IN POSTCOLONIAL WRITING: READING SELECT INDIAN ENGLISH NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Background: Indian English fiction inherits English as a language of colonial administration and education while remaking it for multilingual Indian experience. **Objective:** To compare how five major Indian English novels convert the problem of English into narrative form and distribute voice, intelligibility, and social authority. **Methods:** This qualitative comparative study closely reads narrative voice, syntax, register, code-switching, untranslated lexis, translation effects, accent, and silence in Kanthapura, Midnight's Children, The Shadow Lines, The God of Small Things, and The Inheritance of Loss. Interpretive categories derive from postcolonial theory and world-Englishes scholarship. **Results:** The corpus moves from Rao's oralized English through Rushdie's hybridity and Ghosh's polyphony to Roy's strategic opacity and Desai's global English of aspiration and humiliation. Linguistic innovation identifies who may narrate, who must translate, and whose speech receives authority. **Conclusions:** Indian English in these novels is a practice of linguistic citizenship. Nativization contests standard-English authority without automatically dissolving caste, class, gender, or market inequalities.

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INTRODUCTION

Few issues in postcolonial literary studies are as persistent—and as easily simplified—as the question of language. The choice of English in formerly colonized societies has often been described as either complicity with imperial power or pragmatic access to modernity and global readership. Yet Indian English novels repeatedly show that language is not a neutral instrument that writers merely "choose." Instead, English arrives as a historical force: a language of governance, schooling, aspiration, and elite formation, but also a language that can be remade—bent, thickened, hybridized—into forms capable of carrying local worlds. A classic statement of this problem appears in Raja Rao's foreword to Kanthapura, where the narrator confronts the difficulty of conveying "the spirit that is one's own" in a language that is "not one's own," while also insisting that English is not "really an alien language" for Indians because it has become part of their "intellectual make-up." This formulation already contains the enduring paradox of Indian English writing: English is at once inheritance and imposition, intimacy and estrangement, a means of public address and a reminder of cultural asymmetry. The present study approaches "language issues" in Indian English fiction as a set of interlinked tensions rather than a single moral debate. First, there is the political tension: English is unevenly distributed in India, tied to class privilege, institutional access, and the power to be heard.

Second, there is the aesthetic tension: English in Indian novels often bears the pressure of translation from Indian languages and speech rhythms; it therefore becomes experimental, "non-standard," and stylistically innovative. Third, there is an ethical tension: the novel must represent speech communities—especially marginalized or subaltern lives—without turning them into "local color" for metropolitan consumption. Fourth, there is a marketplace tension: Indian English fiction circulates globally; its language must negotiate between readability and opacity, between global legibility and local density. To examine these tensions concretely, the paper reads five influential novels across the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: Kanthapura, Midnight's Children, The Shadow Lines, The God of Small Things, and The Inheritance of Loss. The selection is purposeful: together these texts provide a historical arc (late-colonial to globalized India) and a range of stylistic strategies (village-epic narration; exuberant linguistic hybridity; memory-driven cosmopolitan narration; punning and lexical play; and the ironies of global English in the hills and in diaspora). While each novel has distinct thematic concerns, they share a common preoccupation: language is where postcolonial history becomes form. The paper asks: How do Indian English novels formalize the politics of language? What narrative techniques enact nativization and code-switching? How do these texts manage translation, untranslatability, and multilingual social reality? And what do these strategies imply

about voice, power, and "who gets to speak" within the novel's imagined public sphere?

Conceptual Framework

Postcolonial literary theory has long argued that English can be both a tool of domination and a site of counter-appropriation. One influential formulation comes from Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, who describe postcolonial writing as marked by practices of abrogation (refusing the authority of "standard" English) and appropriation (remaking English to express local cultural experience). Their account matters here because it treats linguistic deviation not as error but as strategy—an aesthetic answer to historical inequality (2). Bhabha's work on hybridity and the "third space" complicates the idea that language is either purely colonial or purely indigenous. In postcolonial discourse, meaning is often produced in an in-between zone where authority is mimicked, displaced, and transformed (3). For Indian English novels, this helps explain why mixed registers, translated idioms, and multilingual traces are not merely "background realism" but central to the novel's epistemology: they show that identity is formed in translation, not prior to it.

Sociolinguistic scholarship on world Englishes offers a crucial corrective to purely symbolic treatments of English. Braj B. Kachru argues that English in India has undergone processes of nativization—acquiring localized norms, rhetorical habits, and pragmatic functions. His account of "Indianization" clarifies why Indian English fiction often feels like English operating under different cultural pressures and communicative expectations. Rather than seeing such writing as perpetually "derivative," Kachru's framework allows us to read Indian English as a legitimate, historically produced variety with its own expressive possibilities.

At the same time, major critics warn against romanticizing hybridity as an automatic politics. Aijaz Ahmad's critique of "Third World literature" frameworks is relevant because it resists homogenizing diverse histories into a single postcolonial essence (5). For language debates, the point is sharp: English does not function identically across regions, castes, or classes; nor does "writing in English" carry the same stakes for all Indian subjects. Similarly, Spivak's writings on subalternity and translation caution that representation can reproduce epistemic violence even when it claims to "give voice" (6). Language, therefore, is not only a question of form; it is also a question of ethical mediation.

Within Indian literary criticism, Meenakshi Mukherjee's account of the Indian novel in English emphasizes how writers negotiate cultural location and narrative technique within a language historically associated with colonial schooling and elite readership (7). G. N. Devy, in turn, links the colonial period to a critical "amnesia" about indigenous traditions of criticism and aesthetic theory (8). Together these perspectives position Indian English novels inside a broader ecology of Indian languages—where English is powerful but never solitary.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study uses a qualitative, text-centred approach grounded in close reading. Instead of treating "English" as an abstract symbol, it examines language-events in the novels: moments where lexical choice, syntax, register, untranslated words, dialogue rhythms, and narrative voice make social hierarchy and cultural translation visible. Evidence is drawn from recurrent stylistic patterns (e.g., italics, glossaries, bilingual dialogue cues, proverb-like sentences rendered in English) and from strategically significant episodes where voice and power are negotiated through speech. The method is comparative: each novel is read on its own terms, but also as part of an evolving set of postcolonial strategies for remaking English in India. The corpus was purposively selected to represent a chronological arc from late-colonial nationalism to liberalization-era globalization and to provide contrasting linguistic designs. The units of analysis were recurrent formal features rather than isolated vocabulary: narrative cadence, translated idiom, lexical retention, code-switching, typographic deviation, register, accent, reported speech, and silence. Each feature was interpreted in relation to its immediate narrative function and to the social position of the speaker. Because the study uses published literary texts and secondary scholarship, no human participants, clinical data, or statistical tests were involved. The method supports interpretive comparison; it does not claim frequency-based generalization to all Indian English fiction.

RESULTS

Kanthapura: Legitimacy: Rao's foreword (1) remains foundational not because it offers a final solution but because it articulates the inaugural dilemma with unusual clarity: the Indian writer must make English carry Indian "tempo," yet doing so requires deviation from English norms. The very phrasing—English as "not one's own," yet not "alien"—reveals a historically produced bilingual consciousness. English is both intimate (learned, institutional, mentally available) and estranging (socially marked, culturally tilted).

In Kanthapura (1), this dilemma becomes narrative technique. The novel's village storyteller voice often sounds like English spoken under the pressure of Kannada/Tamil oral rhythms: long additive sentences, proverb-like moral commentary, and a communal rather than individualistic account of events. This style is not simply "local color." It is a linguistic solution to a representational problem: how can a novel written in English preserve the cadence of a village oral world without translating it into metropolitan realism? Rao's answer is to produce English as if it were already translated—English that behaves like an Indian language. Here "language issue" is inseparable from narrative ethics: the novel refuses to make the village fully transparent to the outsider; instead it offers a mediated access that retains density. What also becomes visible is the question of audience. If English is the "language of our intellectual make-up," whose intellect is implied—urban, schooled, elite? The novel's Gandhian-nationalist politics may be village-centered, but its medium places it within a broader public sphere shaped by colonial education. The language issue is therefore also a citizenship issue: who is imagined as the addressee of the nation's story?

Midnight's Children: Hybridity

Rushdie's Midnight's Children (9) radicalizes the nativizing impulse by turning linguistic mixture into narrative energy. The novel's famous stylistic exuberance—its neologisms,

hybrid idioms, and switches in register—suggests that postcolonial history itself is best told in a language that refuses purity. When the narrator's voice constantly performs exaggeration, punning, and self-correction, English becomes a medium that can stage the chaos of nation-making: Partition, violence, reinvention, and the unstable archive of memory.

In this aesthetic, hybridity is not decorative: it is epistemological. A "pure" English would imply stable reference and linear history; Rushdie's mixed English implies fractured time, contested truth, and the impossibility of a single authorized narrative. Here we see the postcolonial novel's key linguistic insight: history is not only what happened; it is also how it can be said. Language is the medium through which political memory becomes either public or private, credible or suspect. Yet this strategy also raises Ahmad's warning: hybridity can become a brand—an easily marketable sign of "postcolonial difference." The question therefore becomes: when does linguistic play disrupt imperial authority, and when does it become a cosmopolitan commodity? Rushdie's achievement lies in making this question unavoidable: the narrator's performance is so self-conscious that it continuously exposes the politics of narration itself.

The Shadow Lines: Polyphony

Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines (10) offers a different answer to the language issue: not linguistic carnival, but controlled polyphony. The novel's structure—memory crossing borders, intimate voices forming a transnational archive—foregrounds how language mediates belonging. English here is often quieter, less flamboyant than Rushdie's; its power lies in how it stages multiple speech positions: the familial, the political, the cosmopolitan, the communal.

The novel's title already suggests a linguistic problem: borders are sustained not only by maps but by narratives and terminologies—how riots are named, how "home" is defined, how foreignness is narrated into being. In this sense, language is a technology of partition. The violence of 1964 riots, for instance, is not separable from the stories communities tell about each other. Ghosh's English often reads like an ethical instrument: it slows the reader down, refusing sensational description and instead emphasizing the fragile making of meaning across places.

The "language issue" here shifts from lexicon to epistemology: who has the authority to name events? What is lost when experience is framed through inherited political vocabularies? Ghosh's careful modulation implies that postcolonial English can be a medium of critical hesitation—a way to resist the ready-made categories through which nations simplify themselves.

The God of Small Things: Opacity

Roy's The God of Small Things (11) dramatizes language not only as English vs Indian languages, but as a struggle within English itself. Roy's style is marked by typographic play, childlike repetition, broken syntax, capitalized phrases, and a sensuous attention to sound. Such techniques show English being re-childed—made to carry Kerala's textures and the twins' wounded perception. Language becomes affective form. At the same time, the novel's social world is sharply stratified. The language issue becomes a caste/class issue: who speaks which register, who is forced into silence, whose speech is treated as noise rather than voice. Roy's narrative does not treat multilingualism as harmonious pluralism; it is a field of coercion, ridicule, policing. In such a setting, using English is never simply liberatory. English can be the language of aspiration and of exclusion; it can sharpen social hierarchies even as it offers the novel global reach. Roy's strategy often involves strategic opacity: retaining local words, cultural cues, and rhythms that resist full assimilation into "standard" English. The effect is ethically double. On one hand, it refuses to domesticate the local for the outsider. On the other, it risks turning opacity into exotic appeal for the global market. The novel's seriousness lies in making that risk part of its moral landscape: language is never innocent; it is always implicated in who benefits from representation.

The Inheritance of Loss: Aspiration

Kiran Desai's The Inheritance of Loss (12) pushes the language question into the era of globalization. Here English is not only colonial residue; it is a currency of migration, a sign of employability, a marker of modern desire. The novel's hill-station setting and its U.S. immigrant subplot expose English as a medium of aspiration that can easily become humiliation. Desai's text repeatedly shows characters trapped in a painful double bind: to gain social mobility they must internalize metropolitan English norms; yet doing so often intensifies self-contempt and social alienation. The "inheritance" is therefore linguistic as well as economic: English arrives as a promise of entry into the world and as a constant reminder of exclusion from it. The novel's irony is linguistically grounded: it reveals how accent, fluency, and register can determine dignity in everyday life.

In this sense, Desai offers a late-postcolonial update to Rao's early dilemma. Rao asked: how can English carry Indian spirit? Desai shows: what happens when English, now global, carries the pressure of comparison everywhere—at home, in diaspora, in bureaucratic spaces, in service work. English becomes a measure that the postcolonial subject is made to fail. The language issue becomes a psychic and bodily issue: shame, voice, breath.

DISCUSSION

The comparative findings qualify two easy conclusions about postcolonial English. First, formal deviation from metropolitan usage is not merely resistance in itself. Rao's translated cadence and Rushdie's linguistic excess challenge standard-English authority, but their political meanings depend on narration, audience, and circulation. Hybridity may register historical mixture while also becoming legible as a marketable style (3,5). The relevant question is therefore not whether a text is hybrid, but what relations of voice and recognition its hybridity enables. Second, English does not operate uniformly across the corpus. In Kanthapura it mediates a village-national story; in Midnight's Children it makes historical instability audible; in The Shadow Lines it tests the terms by which borders and violence are remembered; in The God of Small Things it joins childhood perception to caste and familial prohibition; and in The Inheritance of Loss it measures accent, employability, migration, and shame.

These functions confirm Kachru's account of nativization (4) while also showing why sociolinguistic legitimacy alone cannot settle literary questions of representation. The phrase linguistic citizenship names this connection between form and entitlement. A novel allocates more than dialogue: it distributes narrative duration, interpretive credibility, translatability, and the right to remain partially opaque. Spivak's warning about representation (6) remains relevant because an apparently sympathetic English narration may still convert marginalized experience into an object for elite consumption. Conversely, untranslated words or disrupted syntax are not automatically emancipatory; their value lies in the specific pressures they place on the reader and on the hierarchy of voices within the text. The study is limited by its small, canonical corpus and by its qualitative design. It does not represent the full regional, Dalit, Adivasi, diasporic, or translated range of Indian writing in English, and it does not quantify linguistic features. Further work could compare these findings with reader reception, translated editions, or a larger corpus. Within its stated scope, however, the comparison demonstrates that language is not an ornamental feature added to postcolonial themes. It is one of the principal means by which these novels think historically and ethically.

CONCLUSION

Across these novels, English emerges neither as a simple colonial imposition nor as a neutral global medium. It is a contested space where history becomes form. In Kanthapura (1), the novel invents an English that behaves like translated oral narration, confronting the inaugural problem of legitimacy and audience. In Midnight's Children, hybridity becomes method, producing a language adequate to fractured national history while exposing the marketplace risk of "difference" as style. In The Shadow Lines, English becomes an ethical instrument of hesitation and polyphony, revealing that borders are linguistic as much as geopolitical. In The God of Small Things, language is at once sensory play and social stratification, where code, register, and silence map caste-class power. In The Inheritance of Loss, English is global currency and local wound, a medium of aspiration that often reproduces humiliation.

Taken together, these texts suggest that the central "language issue" in Indian English fiction is not whether English should be used, but how English is made to answer to Indian life without erasing the inequalities that English itself carries. The novel becomes a laboratory where nativization, code-switching, and translation-effects are tested as aesthetic solutions to political history.

The resulting language is not merely "Indian-themed English"; it is English transformed by Indian multilingual realities—sometimes celebratory, sometimes tragic, always ethically charged. Ultimately, language in these novels functions as a form of linguistic citizenship: it allocates the right to narrate, to be believed, and to be intelligible, even as it persistently unsettles the authority of any single "standard" English.

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Glossary of Abbreviations

IAS — Indian Administrative Service
L1 — first language

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